

An Exploratory View of Religious Experiences and Preaching Among Selected Students in Two Catholic Schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the general religious experiences and the concept of “preaching” among selected student respondents in two Catholic Schools. Inspired by the pastoral letter, *Dialogue Towards Harmony* (Valles, 2019) in celebration of the *Year of Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue and the Indigenous Peoples*, this research describes the religious experiences of student respondents, with special attention to non-Catholic students enrolled in these Catholic schools using data from *The Study on Preaching’s* survey and select interviews. It argues about shared prayers as a form of preaching in Catholic schools with non-Catholic students. This article contributes to understanding the concept of “preaching” occurring in a shared space of multi-faith and dialogue.

Keywords : *religious experiences, preaching, ecumenism*

STUDY CONTEXT

Studies on youth and religion have garnered attention in recent decades due to the recognition of the role of young people in church life (for example, Cnaan et al., 2004; Collins-Mayo, 2012; Hardie et al., 2013; Hemming &

Madge, 2012). In the Philippines, there has been a steady interest in studying Filipino youth religiosity, particularly in Catholicism (for example, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines - Episcopal Commission on Youth and the Catholic Education Association of the Philippines, 2015; Cornelio, 2010, 2014; Cornelio & Salera, 2012; del Castillo et al., 2020; Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014; Social Weather Stations, 1996; UST Social Research Center, 1982a; UST Social Research Center, 1982b, 1986). These studies demonstrate the relative salience of understanding young people's religiosity in understanding church life and dynamics. The perceptions of young people on religion matter, especially in countries like the Philippines, where Catholicism remains an important fabric of social life (Abellanosa, 2013; Batan, 2021; Jocano, 1997; Rivera, 2010).

This paper, as with all the articles in this issue, resonates relatively the same interest in understanding the role of the Catholic religion in the lives of selected young Filipinos in contemporary times. Particularly, the paper focuses on reporting the general religious experiences of select youth respondents with a special interest in contributing to the concept of "preaching." While there is a growing interest in understanding "preaching" as a concept and practice (such as these sample publications, Akerlund, 2014; Grimenstein, 2002; Hilbert, 2003; Kim, 2018; Lose, 2013; Munsayac, 2019; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), there remains a need to continue examining this concept because of its place as a core value in the charism of the Dominicans as a religious order known as the "Order of Preachers."

Another specific interest in this paper is understanding religious experiences and preaching in resonance with the multi-faith reality in Catholic schools. Inspired by the pastoral letter, *Dialogue Towards Harmony* (Valles, 2019) in celebration of the *Year of Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue and the Indigenous Peoples*, this paper reports about non-Catholic students enrolled in two Catholic schools as a preliminary discussion pad for preaching and ecumenism as enthused by Pope Francis (Mayaki, 2021) and relevant church documents (Pope Paul VI, 1964, 1965).

This multi-faith context poses challenges for effective preaching. As expressed in the article entitled, *Challenges Facing the Order of Preachers Today*, by Fr. Vivian Boland, OP:

"The fundamental response to all challenges is to focus our lives as fully as possible on God. This we can do only with the virtue we call charity, the grace by which we participate in God's loving. Enabling us to love God and love others... Indeed the one who preaches is the first one who must know the perennial and contemporary challenges. Who needs preaching? Who wants

to be preached to, or to be preached at? It is when we discern the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture that we understand human nature better and ‘new ways to truth are opened’.”(Boland, 2018).

As this paper involves student respondents of multi-faith affiliations in two Catholic schools, it offers a preliminary description of the relations between religious experiences and their perceptions of “preaching.” Thus, this paper argues about the possibility of offering and developing effective preaching approaches for non-Catholics studying in Catholic schools. Our hope is to contribute to understanding the concept of “preaching” occurring in a shared space of multi-faith and dialogue.

RESEARCH FOCUS

From the *Studying on Preaching (SoP)* project employed under the seminar graduate course entitled, *Preaching from the Ground: Exploring Research and Social Realities in the Philippines*, this paper focuses on describing the religious experiences and concept of “preaching” among the selected student respondents in two Catholic schools. The following questions guide this paper:

1. What is the socio-demographic profile of student respondents from two Catholic schools?
2. What are the religious experiences of these student respondents?
3. In terms of the student respondents’ multi-faith context, how would “preaching” as a social process, particularly of non-Catholic students, be meaningfully experienced in Catholic schools?

CONCEPTUAL LENS AND METHODS

The symbol of a fire torch with two open hands, as illustrated in *Figure 1.A: Conceptual Framework of the Study on Preaching on Ecumenism* below is a derivation from the general conceptual lens presented in the *Preface*. For this article, the focus on preaching is an inquiry into the dimension of “ecumenism,” particularly on the religious experiences of selected non-Catholic students studying in two Catholic Schools. Here, the “fire” as a metaphor for preaching reflects its encompassing role as a guide to the journeys of faith: “For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys” (Exodus 40, 38).



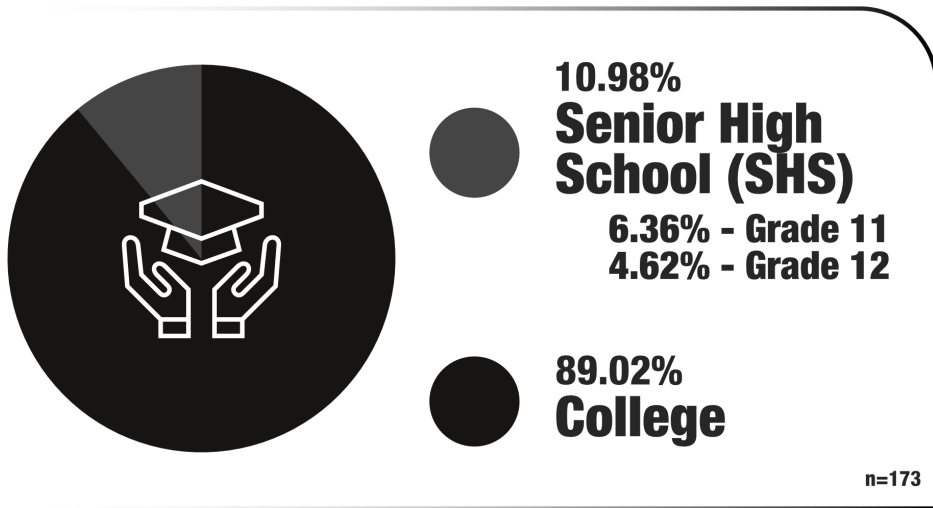
Figure 1.A. Conceptual Framework of the Study on Preaching in the Realm of Ecumenism

Methodologically, this article reports the full socio-demographic profile of select student respondents from two Catholic Schools based on the online survey which is part of the *Study on Preaching (SoP)* project. This provides a contextual overview of respondents based on selected social indicators, which will also be referred to in the succeeding articles. Whenever possible, interview data are reported in support of the observed findings. Particularly, this article describes the general religious experiences of student respondents and gives special attention to the responses of non-Catholic respondents as students of Catholic schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic profile of select student respondents from two Catholic schools is generally characterized as representing relatively young Filipinos from Luzon Island with an average age of 21 years old. On Catholic school representation, more respondents were from the Dominican College of Tarlac (Capas, Tarlac) (71%) than from the Holy Rosary College Foundation,

Inc. (Tala, Caloocan City) (29%). In Table 1.A (see Appendix A), based on the education indicators, there was a total of 173 respondents, where 89.02% were studying in College, and 10.98% were in Senior High School (SHS) (see Infographics 1). The majority of SHS respondents were taking the General Academic Strand (see Table 1.C), while for the college respondents, more than a third were enrolled in Information Technology; a third in Secondary Education Major in English, and the rest were enrolled in Secondary Education English and Mathematics, Political Science, and Computer Science (see *Table 1.D*).

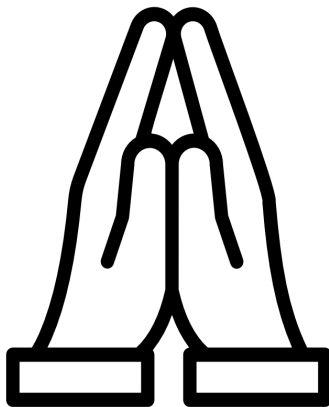


Infographics 1. Educational Level of Student Respondents

The reported general religious experiences of select student respondents (see *Appendix A Table 2*) indicate a positive, very high level of willingness “to help someone in need even if s/he belongs to another religion” (99.42%) (see *Table 2.A*). However, the experiences of religion or faith, when the probe seems to direct attention to some tensions as indicated by the student respondents’ answers in situations such as the 65.12% agreement to “feeling offended if someone insults your faith”; to “seeing any student discriminated against because of religion” (58.48%); and to “knowing someone who expresses negative comments against other religions (77.91%) (see *Table 2.B, 2.C, 2.D*). These responses indicate, to a certain degree, how religion is being negotiated by these students in and out of schools. Two indicators, nevertheless, show a relatively high religious tolerance among student respondents when asked the questions: “In your observation, do you know someone who truly respects religion other than their own?” (86.47% agreed), and “Did you ever learn about religious pluralism/diversity in school?” (85.55% agreed) (see *Table 2.E & 2.F*). These

observations indicate a certain level of ecumenism being experienced by the student respondents.

Table 3 (see *Appendix A*) identifies the religious affiliation of student respondents. As expected, seven of every ten respondents are Roman Catholic, followed by Iglesia ni Cristo (10.98%), Born Again (7.51%), and other religions (see *Infographics 2; Table 3.A*). Interestingly, this table also reveals some reported “experience of leaving Catholic faith for another religion” (17.97%), and “family members leaving their Catholic faith for another religion (28.91%)” (see *Table 3.A.1 & 3.B*). This demonstrates the volatile religious experience of the minority student respondents in terms of maintaining their Catholic affiliation as well as some of their family members.



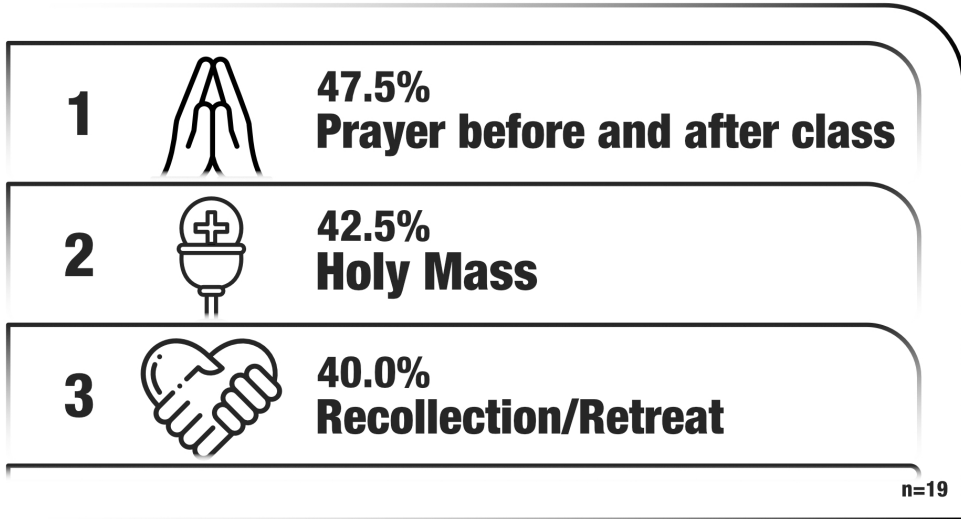
73.99%	Roman Catholic
10.98	Iglesia ni Cristo
7.51	Born Again
4.62	Others
4.62	Jehova's Witness
0.58	Protestant
0.58	Islam
0.58	None

n=173

Infographics 2. Religious Affiliation of Student Respondents

When the non-Catholic student respondents were asked about their experiences in studying in Catholic schools, out of the 45 responses, a majority (91.11%) revealed that they “personally chose to study in Catholic School (see *Appendix A Table 5.A*). In addition, a majority (88.89%) of the non-Catholic respondents are aware of any policy that requires them to attend Catholic-related activities (see *Table 5.B*). Of these Catholic activities, the first three activities reported, which they were required to attend are the following: Prayer before and after classes (47.50%/52.50%), Holy Mass (42.50%/42.50%), and Recollection/Retreat (40.00%/25.00%) (see *Infographics 3; Table 5.C*). Interestingly, the first activity that these non-Catholic respondents reported appreciating most was

“Prayer before and after class” (45.00%) (see *Table 5.D*). These preliminary data direct attention to a relative level of openness of these non-Catholic students in interacting with Catholic students in activities where ecumenism and interreligious sharing and dialogue are possible such as reciting “prayers.”



Infographics 3. Religious Activities Required to Attend in Catholic Schools

Based on selected interviews, the reported religious experiences of non-Catholic student respondents may be characterized by relatively positive experiences that led to a “stronger sense of belongingness” with fellow students who are Catholics and with faculty, religious nuns, and priests teaching Theology courses. The requirement for these non-Catholics to study Catholicism was reported to have offered a space for them to understand the Catholic faith as a testimony to an ecumenical path. As expressed by Rejoice, a non-Catholic interview respondent:

“Before studying at (this Catholic School), I have no knowledge of (being) Catholic. I was prejudiced and close-minded about other religions. Maybe because I don’t understand their own beliefs. When I’m in my province, I have friends who are mostly Catholics and I always ask them about their beliefs... When I studied here, I have Theology subjects and I am happy and excited because finally, my questions were answered. I have become open-minded and more respectful to (Catholic) beliefs. It is like being police, (investigating), and discovering the two sides of the story. I have become more open to my Catholic friends and treat them as my sisters/brothers.”

When it comes to probing non-Catholic student respondents' participation in Catholic activities, a short group interview with Jessie and Patrick unravels the expected feeling of uneasiness in attending these activities because the service and teachings are completely different from their own religion. But despite being a requirement, these respondents expressed how these activities allowed them to understand the Catholic faith, which led them to respect various faiths. They also reported how their Catholic schoolmates respected them in return. Thus, they described studying in Catholic school as witnessing how unity in a diversity of religions was possible, even having different ways of praising the Lord. According to these respondents, "Differences do not become a problem at all when we know how to respect each other."

The religious experiences of student respondents, particularly the non-Catholic students presented above, indicate two working insights relative to understanding "preaching" as a social process. First, in the multi-faith context, such as in Catholic schools with an increasing number of non-Catholic students, it seems that this presents a "teaching" opportunity to learn about each other's faith. As Catholic schools open their doors to non-Catholic students, the requirements to take Theology subjects and attend religious activities can offer a space for interreligious dialogue using an ecumenical approach. This means producing creative ecumenical preaching pedagogies that lead to religious competence than mere religious tolerance.

Second, among the Catholic activities identified by non-Catholic student respondents as being meaningfully experienced in Catholic schools, "praying before and after class" appears to be a well-accepted shared activity among them. This brings forth attention to the notion of "preaching" in the form of prayers. Here, prayers may be seen as an essential preaching tool for communicating various forms of faith where a sense of belongingness may emerge despite the religious differences. This insight is best expressed in the following exchanges among the interview respondents (Jessie and Patrick) and the researcher on the non-Catholic students' view of attending the Mass, which is considered the highest form of prayer in Catholicism, and their view about preaching, which tells the story about the shared religious teaching of "being good persons." This exchange synthesizes how Catholic schools might encourage religious activities where prayers, such as the Holy Mass, become a preaching tool towards ecumenism.

Researcher (R): Patrick (P), you said that you have attended the Mass, right?

P: Yes

R: And Jessie (J), you said you know about the Mass, right?

J: But I have attended some when there is Mass in the school and that time there is class or activities, I attended them.

R: Do you find that Mass is the same with your service (in your own religion)?

J: Yes, Sir...some parts that are the same, and some parts are different, especially in the lectures and rites.

R: How about you Patrick?

P: Yes, Sir; there are some parts the same and some parts are different.

R: How do you find it when you attended the Mass?

J: Sure sir, I felt a little uneasy, but I should respect them. I respect them and I just listen.

R: How about the way they deliver it? Is it boring?

J & P: Not so boring, Sir.

R: Is there anything that...the priest said...that still you remember?

P: When he (the priest) says about how to be a good person.

J: When I heard them (the priests), I also remembered the teachings that I had in my religion. And in the priest's teachings, they are the same and some are different. What is the same is when he (the priest) teaches us about how to be a good person.

Indeed, Catholic schools can provide non-Catholic students a meaningful space to understand various faith dimensions through shared prayers, which this paper argues is an effective form of preaching.

According to Vima Dasan, SJ (as cited in Cox, 2002) just like preaching is to deliver the message of God, through prayer, also we communicate God's word or message to the people. Prayer also plays the same role as preaching. They proclaim the Gospel (Good News of God), convince, reproach, and encourage the people. Effective preaching means engendering heartfelt, shared prayers of those who participate in this religious activity. This leads to understanding faiths as inspiring people, in this case, young Filipinos, to act as good persons, either Catholics or non-Catholics. Such prayerful preaching stimulates respect like a fire that warms diverse communities towards dialogue and ecumenism.

CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

Using the preliminary data of religious experiences of select student respondents from two Catholic schools, with special attention to the non-Catholic respondents, this paper concludes with an insight into the significance of “prayer” as a form of preaching. The observations reported in this article demonstrate the relative influence of Catholic schools to provide teaching and learning opportunities for students to understand religious tolerance and competence, which appear to have been experienced through shared prayers as expressed in various religious activities. If these shared prayers are meaningfully seen and transformed into preaching prospects, then communicating respect, tolerance, and competence among various faiths towards ecumenism can be meaningfully experienced.✍




*Visual Strip 3. Students from Catholic Schools.
From the photo archives of the National Catechetical Study (NCS) 2016-2021:
Pastoral Action Research and Intervention (PARI) Project.*

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